

December 17, 2009 letter to which I referred.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

U.S. SENATE,

Washington, DC, December 17, 2009.

Mr. ABHISIT VEJAJIVA,
Prime Minister, Kingdom of Thailand, Wisconsin Ave, N.W., Washington, DC.

DEAR MR. PRIME MINISTER, We are writing to express our concern regarding reports of a possible repatriation to Laos of Lao Ilmong from the Huay Nam Khao camp and Nong Khai detention center in Thailand. While we recognize that the Kingdom of Thailand is burdened by the large number of refugees it hosts on its territory, we encourage you to not take steps to repatriate any individuals to Laos at this time. Thailand is a strong ally of the U.S., and the cooperation between our governments, including a history of working together on Laotian and Burmese refugee issues, is greatly valued.

We understand that your government has conducted screenings in the Phetchabun camp in fluay Nam Khao to identify and separate refugees meriting protection from those migrating for primarily economic reasons. We remain concerned, however, regarding the lack of transparency in this screening process, and the absence of a civilian entity to lead it. In July of this year, a group of Senators sent a letter to General Songkitti Jaggabatarata requesting more information about the criteria and methods used in screening Laotian Hmong in the Phetchabun camp, but a response to this inquiry has not yet been received.

We acknowledge the difficulty that this issue has posed for both your country as well as the inhabitants of the camps. However, we believe that the lack of transparency in the screening and repatriation process only exacerbates these difficulties and heightens international concern regarding these populations. A process that adheres to the core tenets of the refugee convention, and is conducted by an independent third party organization, could resolve much of this concern by helping to ensure that the Lao Hmong are able to provide a full and accurate account that can serve as the basis for an appropriate status determination.

Before repatriating any individuals to Laos, we strongly urge your government to work with an independent third-party organization to conduct a transparent screening process consistent with international standards. Once such a process is in place, we hope that any Hmong determined to have refugee status will be provided opportunities for third country resettlement. This includes the individuals at the Nong Khai center, who have already been screened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. For those who are not judged to require protection, we encourage you to work with international organizations and the governments of the U.S. and Laos to establish a repatriation process that includes effective third party monitoring.

We also understand that Assistant Secretary of State Eric Schwartz will be visiting Thailand in the very near future. We hope that the U.S. and Thailand can work closely to find a solution that alleviates the burden of this situation on Thailand, as well as the concerns about the repatriation of those in need of protection, and we would be happy to consult with you on this process.

We appreciate your efforts to ensure a transparent process and just resolution to this issue. The Kingdom of Thailand remains a close ally of the United States and we look

forward to working with your government to strengthen this important relationship.

Sincerely,

Russell D. Feingold, United States Senator; Barbara Boxer, United States Senator; Sheldon Whitehouse, United States Senator; Richard G. Lugar, United States Senator; Patrick J. Leahy, United States Senator; Lisa Murkowski, United States Senator; Amy Klobuchar, United States Senator; Mark Begich, United States Senator; Al Franken, United States Senator.

TRIBUTE TO LEWIS K. BILLINGS

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, today I express my deep appreciation to a great Utahn and friend, Provo City Mayor Lewis K. Billings, whose tenure as mayor will soon come to an end. It has been my distinct pleasure to work with Mayor Billings over the past 12 years.

Nestled at the base of the Rocky Mountains, Provo was founded by rugged pioneers in 1849 and is one of the oldest cities in the West. Today, Provo is one of largest cities in the State of Utah. Mayor Billings and his beautiful wife Patti are longtime residents of Provo and raised eight wonderful children there.

Mayor Billings was elected Provo City Mayor in November 1997, after completing 3 years as chief administrative officer and director of community and government relations for the city of Provo. He and I share many of the same conservative values and principles and his service as mayor is a strong reflection of his dedication to those ideals. Mayor Billings will long be remembered for focusing on effective public safety and law enforcement, fiscal responsibility, economic development and job creation, neighborhood and downtown revitalization, the arts, emergency readiness, and a host of other local, regional, and national public policy issues. During his tenure, Provo City has consistently received national recognition for low crime rates, high quality of life, and positive business development.

Mayor Billings has accomplished a great deal during his tenure as Mayor of Provo. His dedicated public service and determination to shape Provo into the wonderful city it is today will be remembered for years to come. I ask my colleagues to join me and the citizens of the great State of Utah in thanking Mayor Billings for his many years of dedicated service. We all appreciate his efforts and service, but none so more than me.

GUN OWNERS SUPPORT GUN SAFETY LAWS

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, the debate surrounding gun legislation is often an acrimonious one, creating the perception that Americans are hopelessly divided on this policy issue. After listening to the positions of the National Rifle Association, NRA, a person could

conclude that progress toward a national consensus on sensible gun legislation is a long way off. This perception, however, is just that: merely a perception. In reality, Americans of all political stripes share much common ground when it comes to issues of gun safety, and I am hopeful that this consensus will produce tangible legislative results.

In a recent poll conducted by well-known pollster Frank Luntz, NRA members and non-NRA gun owners expressed strong support for a number of proposed gun safety laws. These gun-owning Americans did not see a contradiction between supporting legislative efforts to reduce gun violence and their right to bear arms. Specifically, 85 percent of non-NRA gun owners and 69 percent of NRA gun owners supported closing the "gun show loophole" by requiring all gun sellers at gun shows to conduct a Brady criminal background check on prospective purchasers. In addition, 86 percent of non-NRA gun owners and 82 percent of NRA members favored a proposal to prevent individuals listed on a terrorist watch list from purchasing firearms. Seventy-four percent of non-NRA gun owners and 69 percent of NRA members also agreed with this statement: "the federal government should not restrict the police's ability to access, use, and share data that helps them enforce federal, state, and local gun laws."

At first glance, these polling numbers may not seem very surprising. After all, these gun safety proposals are founded on common sense and are crafted to keep firearms out of the hands of criminals and terrorists. Unfortunately though, the NRA leadership continues to oppose three Federal gun safety bills that, according to the recent poll, their own members support: the Gun Show Background Check Act, S. 843, which would close the "gun show loophole;" the Denying Firearms and Explosives to Dangerous Terrorists Act, S. 1317, which would prevent individuals listed on terrorist watch lists from purchasing a gun; and the Preserving Records of Terrorist and Criminal Transactions Act, S. 2820, which would improve the ability of law enforcement agencies to prevent gun violence by increasing the amount of time gun background check records are kept.

I support these sensible gun safety measures, and as the polling indicates, so do a majority of American gun owners, including NRA members. The NRA is not only out of touch with mainstream America, they also are out of touch with their own members. It is time to set aside the false claims that too often cloud the debate surrounding gun safety. There is an overwhelming consensus in America: the time to pass commonsense gun safety legislation is now.

SMALL BUSINESS LENDING ENHANCEMENT ACT OF 2009

Mr. UDALL of Colorado. Mr. President, as our Nation begins its economic recovery, our unemployment numbers still remain far too high. Too many Americans are unable to find work, which only slows the pace of our emergence from recession. As part of my continuing effort to support tailored, fiscally responsible methods to getting our economy back on track, I am proud to discuss a bipartisan bill that I introduced this week with several of my Senate colleagues from both sides of the aisle.

The bill is the Small Business Lending Enhancement Act of 2009, which is cosponsored by Senator SCHUMER, Senator LIEBERMAN, Senator SNOWE, Senator BOXER, Senator COLLINS, and Senator GILLIBRAND. If enacted, this legislation would immediately allow increased lending for small businesses to the tune of billions of dollars. It would do so in a safe and fiscally responsible way, without calling on the Federal Government to spend a dime. And best of all, it could lead to large-scale job creation in my home State of Colorado and around the country. For these reasons, I hope that our Senate colleagues join us in urging swift passage of this common-sense legislation.

Small businesses are the engine of our Nation's economy. In the last 15 years, small businesses have generated nearly two-thirds of all new jobs created in the United States, and they currently employ more than half of the American workforce.

However, small businesses continue to struggle accessing credit, as large banks have significantly cut back on Main Street lending. According to a recent Treasury Department report, the 22 banks that have received the most funding through the Troubled Asset Relief Program, TARP, cut their collective small business loan balances by \$11.6 billion from April through October of this year.

America's community banks, which by-and-large did not receive Federal bailout funds, are doing all they can to fill the Main Street credit vacuum created by these large financial institutions. While this legislation I have authored is aimed at helping credit unions ramp up their small business lending, I have also joined with many of my colleagues this year in support of a number of initiatives that will help community banks increase lending to small businesses.

The Small Business Lending Enhancement Act will further these efforts to free up credit for small business. Under current statute, credit unions are required to limit member business lending to 12.25 percent of the credit union's total assets. This bill would raise that cap to 25 percent of total assets, and increase the minimum business loans subject to the cap from \$50,000 to \$250,000. These provisions would increase the amount that credit unions already offering business loans

could provide to small businesses, while also encouraging more credit unions to enter the business loan market. Under current law, many credit unions find it difficult to start member business lending programs because the cost of meeting high regulatory and staffing requirements is too expensive relative to the cap. Raising the member business lending cap would make it easier for credit unions to recover costs, and therefore would increase the number of credit unions able to start small business loan programs.

The Credit Union National Association estimates that these sensible reforms would increase small business lending by \$10 billion within the first year of their enactment, including an increase of nearly \$200 million in my home State of Colorado. This new access to credit would likely produce more than 100,000 new jobs nationwide within the first year of the bill's enactment. That is the sort of pro-business, pro-jobs policy that we need.

Mr. President, these simple statutory changes would not increase Federal outlays one cent, but they would dramatically increase the amount of private capital available to small businesses to help make payroll, buy inventory, and expand and innovate. Moreover, these proposed statutory changes are safe and fully supported by the National Credit Union Administration, the independent Federal regulator with oversight of our Nation's credit unions. To further ensure the safety and soundness of credit unions, this bill requires the NCUA to submit a semiannual report to Congress on the status of credit union member business lending, including any recommendations for legislative changes. In sum, this is a responsibly drafted bill that could help spur much-needed economic growth and job production.

Mr. President, we have to do all we can to responsibly unlock credit markets for small businesses in Colorado and throughout the country. I believe this legislation is an important piece of that effort. I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to quickly pass the Small Business Lending Enhancement Act, and allow our nation's small businesses to again set our country on a path toward job growth and further prosperity.

TAX EXTENDERS

Ms. LANDRIEU. Mr. President, as the Senate moves forward toward ending the debate on health care reform and recessing until the New Year, we leave some important legislation unfinished, including legislation that would extend a number of tax provisions that are set to expire on December 31 of this year. The House has already acted to extend a number of these expiring tax provisions, and I urge my colleagues on the Senate Finance Committee to work with Senator BAUCUS and Senator GRASSLEY to take

up this legislation immediately when we come back from recess.

As part of this effort, I urge my colleagues to extend tax provisions, some of which are set to expire this year, that were enacted by Congress to aid the recovery of the Gulf coast after the 2005 hurricane season. Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf coast and recovery efforts to date have been delayed because of a continuing shortage of skilled construction workers, limited financing, and sustained increases in construction and insurance costs. These challenges have been compounded by the current economic crisis.

By extending a number of the tax provisions that were enacted as part of the Gulf Opportunity Zone legislation that Congress passed in 2005, a number of important projects, including low-income housing projects, will have adequate time to overcome development challenges, and create more opportunities for displaced residents looking to return after the 2005 storms. This will result in more jobs and a faster recovery for the Gulf coast. If Congress fails to act to extend the tax provisions of the GO Zone legislation, including the placed-in-service provision of the GO Zone low-income housing tax credit, at least 77 low-income housing projects in the Gulf Coast are at risk of not being completed.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that a letter I wrote requesting an extension of the placed-in-service provision of the GO Zone low-income housing tax credit be included in any tax extenders legislation be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

U.S. SENATE,

Washington, DC, December 9, 2009.

Hon. MAX BAUCUS,
Chair, Senate Committee on Finance, Washington, DC.

Hon. CHARLES GRASSLEY,
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Finance, Washington, DC.

DEAR CHAIRMAN BAUCUS AND RANKING MEMBER GRASSLEY: We write to request your support for extending the placed-in-service date for affordable housing developments in the Gulf Opportunity Zone.

As you know, GO Zone low income housing tax credits have been vital in our effort to restoring the number of affordable housing units along the Gulf Coast. Tough economic conditions, however, have prevented many of these projects from moving forward at the pace necessary to meet the placed-in-service deadline of January 1, 2011.

Together this bipartisan group of Gulf Coast senators has been working to extend this deadline for two years, to allow 77 low income housing projects in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama to move forward and creating more than 13,000 construction-related jobs. This legislation would not allocate any new credits—it would merely provide additional time to take full advantage of the credits that were issued in the aftermath of the 2005 hurricanes.

Extending the place-in-service deadline is critical to improving the availability of affordable housing along the Gulf Coast. FEMA estimates that the 2005 storms destroyed or heavily damaged 82,000 rental